



Whiteheaded Vulture

Witkopaasvoël

Trigonoceps occipitalis

The Whiteheaded Vulture occurs over much of sub-Saharan Africa except in the forested zones. It is considered to be uncommon and solitary throughout this range, but occurs in high numbers in Uganda and northern Cameroon (Mundy *et al.* 1992). In southern Africa it is widespread in Botswana, though road counts in southern Botswana produced only 1 sighting/1000 km (Borello 1987). The largest number of birds seen in one place is 12, in northern Botswana. Elsewhere it is largely restricted to the Zambezi Valley and southeastern lowveld of Zimbabwe, the lowveld of the Transvaal and Swaziland, northern Kwa-Zulu-Natal, and the Etosha region and Caprivi Strip of northern Namibia. It is estimated that the Kruger National Park and neighbouring conservation areas support about 100 breeding pairs (Tarboton & Allan 1984), and there are perhaps 500 pairs in southern Africa altogether.

Adults are distinctive and conspicuous, but immatures can occasionally be confused with young Lappetfaced *Torgos tracheliotos* and Hooded *Necrosyrtes monachus* Vultures, especially when seen in flight. This is the only vulture species in Africa that shows clear sexual dimorphism: the adult female has white secondaries, while those of the adult male are dark.

Habitat: It is found in hot, dry woodlands, such as Mopane and the fairly arid mixed woodlands characteristic of the eastern lowveld of South Africa. It apparently prefers broadleaved woodland to thornveld but it is present in the *Acacia* woodlands of the Kalahari. Its habitat is usually at low altitudes, except in the higher-lying Kalahari basin (at about 1000 m). Its distribution is quite closely coincident

with that of the Baobab *Adansonia digitata* (Palgrave 1977), which is a favourite nest site.

Movements: The models show no clear evidence of movements, and it is considered to be resident. Indeed, pairs are presumed to hold territories. Immature birds appear to be nomadic and they attend large carcasses much more than do adults. Among ringed birds the farthest distance known between ringing and recovery is about 200 km (Mundy *et al.* 1992).

Breeding: There were few atlas breeding records and this is probably due to the secretive nature of pairs; this species apparently readily abandons nest sites in the face of disturbance. Most breeding was recorded in winter and spring (June–November). Successful breeding takes about 170 days, partly explaining the long period spanned by the atlas records.

Interspecific relationships: Although occurring in sympatry with four other species of vulture in southern Africa, it is 'aloof' from them at carcasses and does not appear to suffer from competitive interactions.

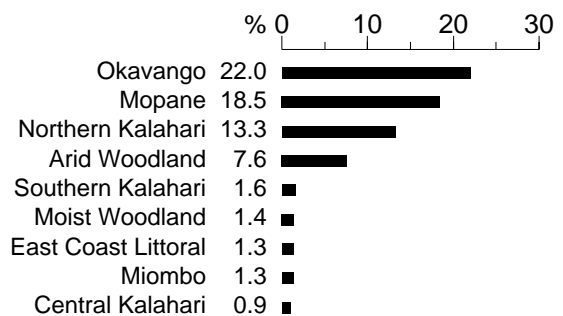
Historical distribution and conservation: This vulture was first made known to science by William Burchell who shot a specimen near Kuruman (2723AD) in 1812. The distribution map shows that it no longer occurs there, though it was recorded close to the Botswana border about 200 km away. Indeed it does not now occur at all in the Cape Province, except in the protected area of the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park. Even in this park it is scarce, accounting for only four of 607 sightings of all vultures over a nearly three-year period (Knight 1987). There is indirect evidence that it has decreased dramatically in the Transvaal woodlands outside the eastern lowveld conservation areas (Tarboton & Allan 1984). The distribution map shows that it is absent from a large central region of Zimbabwe. It is unclear whether this represents any recent extinction there; an earlier account (Irwin 1981) stated that it is 'only a straggler to the central plateau' of Zimbabwe.

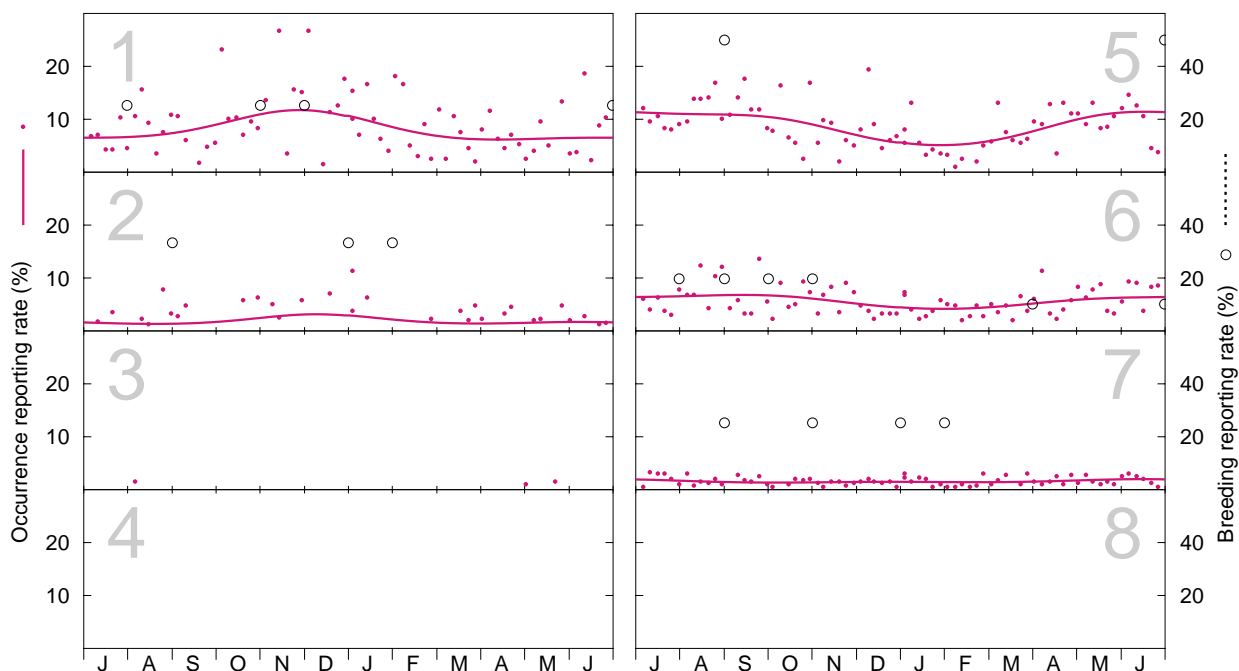
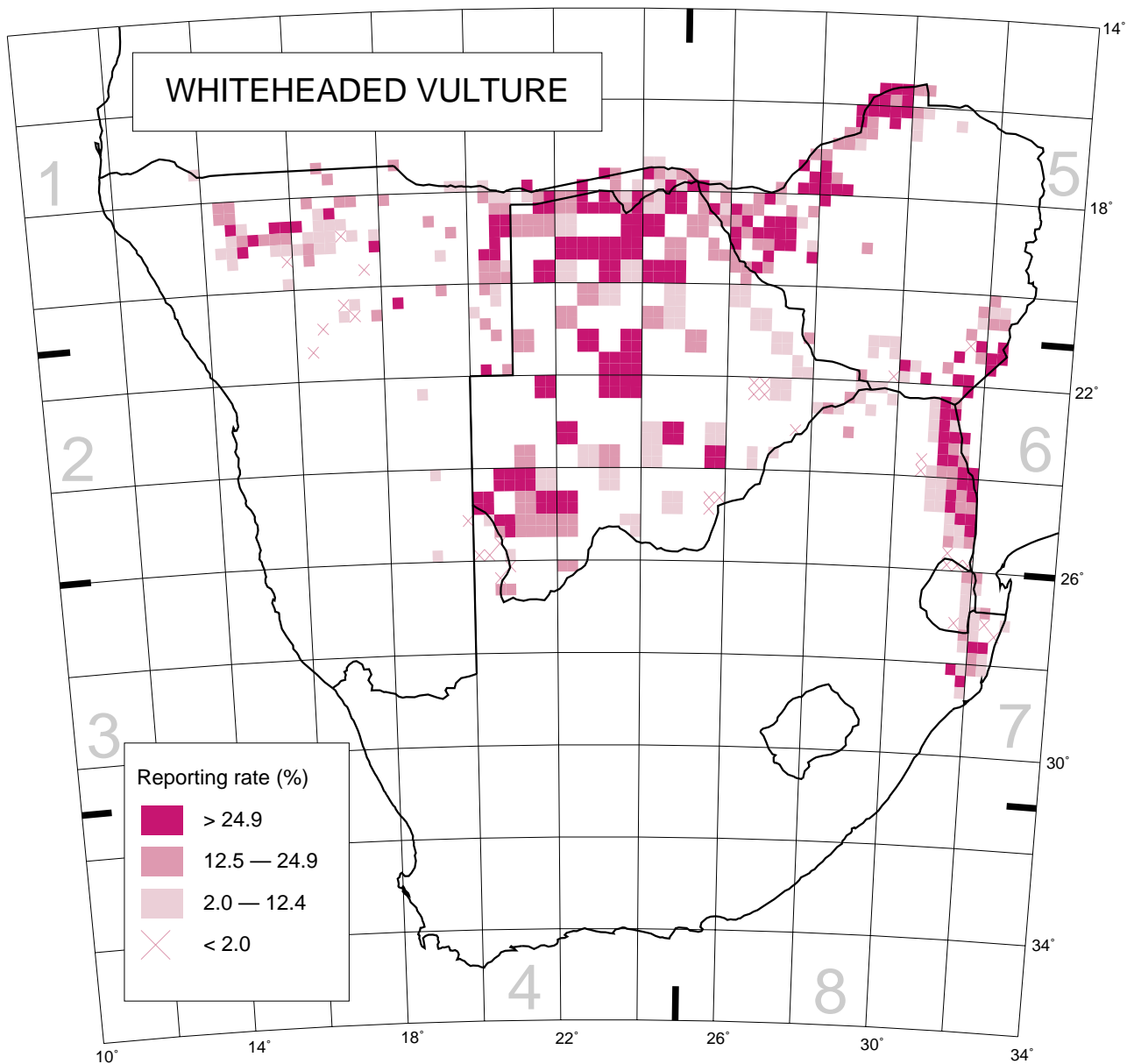
The Whiteheaded Vulture is described as 'rare' in South Africa (Brooke 1984b) and it has likely suffered from poisoning associated with small-carnivore control operations. Another impact may be from a decline in small-mammal communities, caused by trampling and overgrazing in ranching lands, particularly in Namibia, the Transvaal and Zimbabwe.

P.J. Mundy

Recorded in 614 grid cells, 13.5%
Total number of records: 3685
Mean reporting rate for range: 18.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 254, 65, 3, 0, 778, 647, 306, 0; Breeding: 4, 3, 0, 0, 2, 10, 4, 0.